Volta Bureau
1537 35th Street, N.W.
Washington (Georgetown)
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-245

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. DC-245

THE VOLTA BUREAU

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Location: 1537 35th Street, N.W. (Georgetown), northeast corner of 35th Street (formerly Fayette Street) and Volta Place (formerly Fourth Street), Washington, D. C.

Present Owner and Occupant: The Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf

Present Use: Headquarters for the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and the Volta Bureau

Statement of Significance: The Volta Bureau was founded and endowed by Alexander Graham Bell for "the increase and diffusion of knowledge relating to the deaf." Its headquarters building is unique in the Georgetown area because of its Academic Revival design.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The building was begun in 1893 and completed in 1894.

2. Architects: Peabody and Stearns.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The building is located in Square 1274, lot 173 (formerly Square 104). The following is an incomplete chain of title to the property. The references are to the Recorder of Deeds, Washington, D.C.

1828 Deed December 4, 1828, recorded December 4, 1828 in Liber WB 20 folio 644
Tench Ringgold, Marshall
to
Clement Smith
"Grantor as Marshall, by virtue of a writ of fieri facias conveys...lot 173...in Threlkeld's addition to Georgetown..."

1835 Deed October 29, 1835, recorded November 12, 1835 in Liber WB 58 folio 66
Clement Smith
to
Mary Fenwick

1887 Deed July 2, 1887, recorded July 8, 1887 in Liber 1264 folio 313
Julia Fenwick
to
Clare H. Mohun
Beginning at the southwest corner of lot 173; east on Fourth Street 110 ' 6 "; north 60 '; east 9 ' 6"; north 60'; west 120 '; south 120 ' to beginning

1889 Deed July 3, 1889, recorded July 8, 1889 in Liber 1411 folio 106
Clare H. Mohun
to
William A. Johnson
Part of lot 173, 70 ' on Fourth Street by 60 ' on Fayette Street.
Consideration: $3,780

1889 Deed July 12, 1889, recorded July 23, 1889 in Liber 1411 folio 232
William A. Johnson
to
Mabel G. Bell
Part of lot 173

1891 Deed June 30, 1891, recorded July 2, 1891 in Liber 1602 folio 20
Clare H. Mohun
to
Alexander Graham Bell
Part of lot 173, beginning 70 ' east from the southwest corner of said lot
Consideration: $1,440

4. Original plans and construction: A set of the original blueprints of the elevations and plans, and a reproduction of the original design proposal, are owned by the Volta Bureau and kept in their library.

5. Alterations and additions: In 1948 the interior of the building was entirely remodeled to provide additional office space. The fenestration of both the north and south sides has been changed considerably.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

1. Alexander Graham Bell:

Alexander Graham Bell was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, March 3, 1847, the son of Alexander Melville Bell, who originated a phonetic system of visible speech for teaching the deaf. His father's system utilized symbols

by which the positions of the vocal organs in speech could be indicated--a system which made him the most famous speech expert of his day.

The young Bell, too, was primarily interested in speech. He was educated in Scotland and England and taught in London until his family moved to Canada in 1870. In 1871 he was invited to Boston to lecture to teachers of the deaf on his father's method of "visible speech." The young Bell was always interested by the possibilities of teaching the deaf. He became a professor of vocal physiology and mechanics of speech at the School of Oratory at Boston University, from 1873 to 1877. While in Boston, he fell in love with one of his pupils, Mabel G. Hubbard, who had been deaf since she suffered an attack of scarlet fever at the age of four. They were married in 1877.

At that time Bell was working on the experiments that would lead to the invention of the telephone. It was his expert knowledge of sound more than of electricity that was to lead to the final development. A patent for the invention of the telephone was awarded to him on March 7, 1876. In 1880 France awarded him the Volta prize, a sum of 50,000 francs, or about $10,000, for the invention and made him a member of the Legion of Honor. This prize enabled Bell finally to devote himself to the education of deaf children.

Bell had moved to Washington, D.C., in 1878. He decided to invest the money from the Volta Prize in additional experiments and so established the Volta Laboratory in the stables behind the house he had purchased for his parents on the southwest corner of 35th and Volta Place. Along with his cousin, Chichester J. Bell, and Sumner Tainter, he invented the flat wax phonograph record, the first graphaphone record that could survive repeated playing. Bell sold the patent for the phonograph record for $200,000 and took this profit to establish the Volta Bureau and a trust fund for its endowment. The Volta Laboratory was converted into the Volta Bureau for the Increase and Diffusion of Knowledge Relating to the Deaf.

Dr. Bell became a citizen of the United States in 1882. He was a founding member of the National Geographic Society and was its president from 1898 to 1903. He died August 2, 1922, and was

buried at the family estate in Baddeck, Nova Scotia. (Information is taken from the Encyclopedia Americana, vol. III, p. 471; the Dictionary of American Biography, vol. II, pp. 148-152; and a typescript history of the Volta Bureau written in 1945, on deposit in the Volta Bureau Library.)

2. The Volta Bureau:

Alexander Graham Bell founded the Volta Bureau in 1887 to establish a center for information on the education of deaf children. John Hitz, former Consul-General to the United States from Switzerland, who had been Bell's assistant in the laboratory and had handled many of the inquiries that had come into the Laboratory, was named "superintendent" of the Bureau.

As the volume of correspondence increased, and the size of Dr. Bell's library on deafness and speech grew, it became necessary for the Bureau to have its own building. Construction of a building across the street from the Laboratory was begun in 1893. Helen Keller, then 14 years old, was present at the ground-breaking ceremonies on May 8, 1893. The building was completed in 1894.

An article in the "Georgetown" column of The Evening Star (Washington, D.C.), September 1, 1894, indicates that at the time of the article the new institute was not yet furnished. At the end of September, 1894, the books from Bell's library in the Laboratory were to be moved into the new library, a fireproof structure with a capacity of 50,000 volumes.

in 1909 Bell deeded the Bureau to the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf. Because this original name was found to be too long and too difficult to say over the telephone, it was changed to the Volta Speech Association for the Deaf. Recently, however, the association has been renamed the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf, so that Dr. Bell's name would be incorporated in the title.

The library begun by Dr. Bell now houses one of the world's largest collections of books on deafness. The Bureau publishes printed matter on all problems of deafness except medical problems, and answers personal letters from all over the world. The Volta Review, edited at the Bureau, is published ten times a year.

After the remodeling of 1948-1949, the Volta Bureau was rededicated on January 14, 1950. Helen Keller attended these ceremonies also.

The Volta Bureau Library is open to the public. On the walls of the Bureau hang many old photographs of Dr. Bell as well as two of the original wax records with notations in Bell's own writing.

(Information is taken from an interview with Miss Minnie Hill, former Executive Secretary of the Bureau, July 22, 1969; from the program The Rededication of the Volta Bureau, January 14, 1950; and the 1945 history of the Volta Bureau.)

3. Peabody and Stearns, Architects:

Robert Swain Peabody (1845-1917) and John Goddard Stearns (1843-1917) were the architects responsible for the design of the Volta Bureau. This Boston firm was responsible for a number of buildings in that city including the Exchange and Fiske Buildings at Simmons College, the Hemenway Gymnasium at Harvard, and many private residences. They also designed the Union League Club in New York, the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Louis, and the Machinery Building at the World's Columbian Exposition. It is therefore likely that their work was known to Dr. Bell.

Peabody was a graduate of Harvard College, studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, was a member and fellow of the American Institute of Architects and served as the President of that institution from 1900-1901. Stearns' training was in engineering; he was responsible for the business transactions and the supervision of the projects. The partnership was established in 1870 and lasted until the death of both men in 1917.

Having been honored as the recipient of the Volta Prize, it is not surprising that Bell would in some way want to reciprocate the honor to Alessandro Volta when he erected his own building. At some point in his travels, or in the travels of his Swiss associate, John Hitz, it seems likely that one of them would have seen the Volta Temple at Lake Como, Italy. This Corinthian-columned building may have inspired Bell to have his Washington building designed in a similar style.

The existence of the first design submitted by Peabody and Stearns would seem to support this idea, since there is even more similarity between the Tempio Voltiano and the original design, then there is between the Tempio and the Volta Bureau as constructed. Unfortunately, no records of the design for the building have been found yet to confirm this.

The firm of Peabody and Stearns was included in a series, Great American Architects, published by the Architectural Record in 1896. The Volta Bureau is described in the Architectural Record of July 1896 (Vol. 3, p. 65):

> The Volta Bureau at Washington City...has been a great opportunity for monumental design. The simplicity of its plan and requirements have left the artists free to design what they enjoyed; to create a monument and see a fine conception carried out. One fancies that the architects whose work we are considering lean toward heavier cornices than are needed; and in this case both cornice and attic are somewhat in excess. Moreover, the basement windows cut through the molded stereobate are impossible to approve. Apart from these things how good this simple and well-thought-out-structure is; how perfectly are its smaller details used to enliven and modify the larger ones, and how well these latter combine in an architectural whole.

(Information on Peabody and Stearns was taken from the obituary notices for Peabody, Journal of the American Institute of Architects, vol. IV, p. 517; and for Stearns, Journal of the American Institute of Architects, vol. IV, p. 517.)

(Additional information may be found in the American Architect, vol. 112, 1917 and vol. 180, 1926; and Biographical Dictionary of American Architects, Deceased, Los Angeles, 1956.)

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views: The Volta Bureau Library has a reproduction of the original design submitted by the architect as well as many old photographs of both the interior and exterior.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

District of Columbia Deed Books, Recorder of Deeds, Washington, D.C.

Interview with Miss Minnie Hill, former Executive Secretary of the Volta Bureau, July 22, 1969.

Typescript history of the Volta Bureau. Washington, D.C.: Volta Bureau, 1945. (On deposit in Volta Bureau Library.)

b. Secondary and published sources:

"Alexander Graham Bell." Dictionary of American Biography. 1943. Vol. II.

"Alexander Graham Bell." Encyclopedia Americana. Vol. III.

American Architect, Vol. 112, 1917, and Vol. 180, 1926.

"Great American Architects." Architectural Record, July, 1896, p. 65.

Obituary Notices, Peabody and Stearns. Journal of the American Institute of Architects, Vol. IV, 1917, p. 517.

The Evening Star (Washington, D.C.). "Georgetown," Sept. 1, 1894.

The Rededication of the Volta Bureau. Washington, D.C.: 1950.

Withey, Henry F., and Withey, Elsie Rathburn. Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased). Los Angeles: New Age Publishing Co., 1956.

Prepared by Ellen J. Schwartz
Architectural Historian
Commission of Fine Arts
August 1969

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This formal Academic Revival building, with elaborate and accurate detailing, has an impressive site at the corner of Volta Place and 35th Street, elevated on a raised terrace and approached by a wide flight of stairs.

2. Condition of fabric: Excellent. There have been a few changes on the exterior--notably the windows on the south side which replace the original elaborately enframed openings, apparently removed in 1948. The fenestration on the north is also altered, and two small windows have been added inside the west porch. These were inserted when the interior was completely remodeled in 1948-1949 by the Washington architect Russell O. Kluge. As originally built, the structure contained a large reading room in the west half, two offices flanking a stairway near the middle, and the stack area in the east. Now the interior is divided into three floors, including the basement. Only the stack area is little changed, with office space inserted on the second and fourth levels.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This rectangular structure measures 66'-8" x 32'-0" (three-bay front) with the front steps projecting 30'-0" further to the west. The present structure has three stories (including basement) and a four-floor stack area in the east end.

2. Foundations: A 4" course of bluestone is visible below the splayed course of terra cotta. At the rear elevation, the bluestone is exposed somewhat more.

3. Wall construction: The walls are smooth yellow brick laid in common bond (no header courses) with thin mortar joints. In addition, cast terra cotta decoration of the same color is very extensively used. This consists of a splayed footing in imitation of ribbed sandstone, laid in 18" sections. Directly above this is an 8" diameter torus molding enriched with oak leaves and acorns. The next band of decoration marks the first-floor level. This is composed of bead and reel, a Vitruvian scroll (with flowers), a leaf and tongue

molding followed by a guilloche molding and above that, a leaf and tongue molding. Under the window is a bold egg and dart molding, also found at the same level at the corners. The entablature is described below in 8b. On the facade this decoration is augmented by two composite columns in the entry porch. Between these (in the architrave) is a plaque which bears the date "AD MDCCCXCIII." On either side of the porch are bronze plaques attached to the wall. The northernmost reads, "Alexander/Graham Bell/Association/for the Deaf." To the south "Volta Bureau/For the increase and/Diffusion of Knowledge/relating to the Deaf."

4. Framing: Masonry exterior walls, interior remodeled with steel beams.

5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: The front porch is a recessed area in the facade forming a space 7'-2" deep by 17'-8" long, paved in 6" square red tiles. It has two composite columns in antis with double fluting and floral cabling in the lower two drums. This porch is reached by a flight of bluestone covered steps (repaired and replaced by Russell O. Kluge in 1956) which are 17' wide with 6" risers. There are two runs, the first of 10, followed by a landing 4'-4" deep, and final run of 15. The upper run is flanked by cheek pieces with Vitruvian scroll decoration in the molding around the top; the lower flight has a simple coping 19-1/2" wide with similar decoration. A modern iron railing runs up the center of the stairway.

6. Chimneys: There is one chimney in the center of the roof, about 33' from the rear cornice. It is not visible from the street.

7. Openings:

   a. Doorways and doors: The main west doorway has an opening 6' wide with a two-leaf single panel door. The opening is about 12' tall, with a two-panel insert above the doors for the additional height. The original doorway seems to have had a metal grille instead of panels. The opening is framed by a corona-like band with flutes, a band with rosettes (made in 17" long sections), and a final leaf and tongue molding. The frame is crowned with an acanthus architrave. All other doorways are modern: two on the north, one on the south, all of which

appear to be cut down through the brickwork. The door on the south has a simple stone enframement with a gray granite sill, reached by a run of ten concrete steps.

b. Windows and shutters: On the west porch are two narrow windows at the second floor level which were inserted when this floor was added. On the north all the openings are new, made during the 1948 renovation. On the south side there are three one-over-one basement windows with heavy round iron bars forming a grille. A south opening has been expanded to create the south basement entrance. The iron lintel appears original. Above these are four tall limestone enframements dating from 1948 for modern windows on the two floors. The original windows had an enframement similar to the front door, above which was a frieze composed of a shield with a swag at either side between the rosette band and the cornice. Above this appears to be a cartouche with a cornucopia at each side. The window opening was protected by a cast metal screen.

On the rear (east) elevation the stack windows appear to be unchanged. These are formed by seven vertical openings. The openings at the north and south ends are 18" wide; the others, 27". The sills are cream-yellow sandstone and appear to be original. The windows are one-over-one sash in the basement, and two-over-one sash on the other floors. The framing is wood, as is the 10' wide horizontal board at each floor level. At the north elevation there is one two-over-two stack window with stone sill which appears original; the other windows are changed.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The roof slopes west to east, and is covered with tar and crushed rock.

b. Cornice, eaves: The building has a heavy Corinthian entablature. The architrave is composed of bead and reel, a thin acanthus molding, a fluted corona, and egg and dart. Above the frieze is a leaf and tongue molding, dentils, bead and reel, and then egg and dart. The upper part of the cornice is a cyma recta molding with acanthus and lions' heads. This entablature extends across the west and south elevations with a short continuation of about 8' on the north side, after which it is continued (undecorated) in pressed metal on the rest of the north side and across most of the east elevation, until it

rejoins a short 3' section of the entablature at the south corner.

Above the entablature is a parapet with balusters. There are four groups of eleven balusters and two groups of two (at each end) on the south elevation. On the west there are two groups of three. These balusters are acanthus decorated, 30" tall and cast in two pieces (with the joint at the central bead.)

At the north this arrangement is replaced by a solid brick parapet wall, and at the east by an open iron fence. The rain gutter is contained in the metal projecting cornice at the east end. Two copper downspouts are attached to the stack window piers one in from the side walls.

c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: None. There is a projecting stair tower on the roof near the rear, but it is not visible from the street.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The present interior was divided into two floors in 1948, and there was considerable remodeling. At present both first and second floors of the main part of the building (excluding stacks) have a central hall running east-west somewhat south of the center line. At the west end of the first floor is an entrance foyer with an office to the north and south; east of these are two more offices both north and south, followed by small lavatories on the north (now being remodeled) and the modern stairway on the south. At the rear is the second stack level now used as a conference room. On the second floor the arrangement is similar to the first floor except that at the west are two larger offices (each with closets that extend out in the walls beside the recessed porch), and at the east end a large office replaces the lavatories and small office of the first floor. The basement appears to have been remodeled also in 1948. The north-south brick arched passageway under the front porch is 3'-4" wide and now used for storage. The basement is divided into three east-west aisles or sections; the northern two are offices and (to the east) a storage room. The southern section contains the mailing room and stairway. The stacks occupy four levels at the east end. The lowest is 4 risers above the basement; the second floor is a conference room, the third stacks, and the fourth is being remodeled into office cubicles.

2. Stairways: The only old stairs are the iron spiral run in the southwest corner of the stack area, which runs from the basement to the third level only. The tread is 32" long, with 7-3/4" risers, eleven per floor. At the outer edge of the bottom of the riser is a cast-iron drop to which the baluster appears to be attached. The modern stairway against the south wall of the building is a half turn with two landings (runs of 5, 4 and 6) from the first to second floors, and continues up to the fourth level of stacks and to the roof, as well as down to the basement.

3. Flooring: The basement floor is plastic tile; the first and second floors have narrow hardwood and brown linoleum. The new stairhall has light-colored terrazzo.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Most of the partitions on the first and second floors appear to be plasterboard. In the stacks the walls are exposed brick, painted. The ceiling of the upper stack floor has seven 51" brick vaults (running east-west) resting on iron beams.

5. Doorways and doors: The front door, 3" thick, is a two-leaf single-panel door, each leaf being 3' wide. This may not be the original door. There is one six-panel door in the basement to a closet in the northwest corner. There are two similar doors on the second-floor west closets. All other doors in the building are modern, with a simple trim of strip molding 5" wide around the opening.

6. Decorative features and trim: The doorways have a simple strip molding 5" wide with a central recess; this trim is also used to frame the windows.

7. Notable hardware: The stack system is of cast iron and appears to be original. There are five east-west rows per floor, in graduated size (the shelves are shallower at the top). The floors have open grates or solid cast-iron plates. Two solid plates that seemed representative measured 20" x 32", and 37" x 39".

8. Lighting: No old fixtures remain.

9. Heating: Present heating is from boxed radiators.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The Volta Bureau sits on a high terrace at the northeast corner of Volta Place and 35th Street, and faces west.

2. Enclosures: At the south side is a low wire fence behind the hedge.

3. Outbuildings: None.

4. Walks: The front steps begin about 14' from the granite curb of 35th Street. To the west the public sidewalk is brick in common bond; to the south it is in herringbone pattern. North of the building is a concrete drive about 8' wide.

5. Landscaping: The building is bordered on the north, west and south by a hedge 4 to 5 feet in height. The steep slope of the south grade is covered with ivy. The rest of the grounds, including a small vacant lot to the east, is planted in grass.

Prepared by Daniel D. Reiff
Architectural Historian
Commission of Fine Arts
July 1969

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were made in 1969 during a project to record 14 structures and a group of 16 items of "street furniture" in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. The project was conducted by the Commission of Fine Arts with the cooperation of the Historic American Buildings Survey. The resulting documentation was donated to HABS by the Commission and published in 1970 in HABS Selections Number 10, Georgetown Architecture: Northwest Washington, District of Columbia.

The project was under the direction of Mr. Charles H. Atherton, Executive Secretary and Administrative Officer of the Commission of Fine Arts. The recording team was composed of Miss Ellen J. Schwartz and Mr. Daniel D. Reiff, Architectural Historians, and Mr. William P. Thompson, Architect. The photographs were made by photographers J. Alexander and Jack E. Boucher under contract to the Commission.